

## **Conference Report „Genre and Interpretation“**

European PhD-Network „Literary and Cultural Studies“, University of Helsinki, 10-12 June 2009

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## Conference Report „Genre and Interpretation“

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Since the advent of post-modernity, a substantial number of hybrid literary texts has been written combining features of very different genres in one work. It is therefore a topic of much current interest to what extent genres and genre conventions are still relevant for the interpretation of these hybrid texts, specifically, and how genres, in general, are related to the interpretation of a literary work. The international conference on "Genre and Interpretation" from June 10th to 12th 2009 at the University of Helsinki was dedicated to just such cutting-edge research on genre and proved that the phenomenon still lends itself to lively discussion. The conference, which was co-organised by the Finnish Graduate School for Literary Studies and the Finnish Literary Research Society, was also billed as the first international conference of the European PhD-Network "Literary and Cultural Studies" (PhDnet). The conference included four keynote lectures and offered nine workshops with 46 researchers presenting their papers about various topics pertaining to the study of genre, genre theory and their complex tie-ins with interpretation.



After an opening address by organiser PIRJO LYYTIKÄINEN (University of Helsinki), the conference began with a keynote lecture by ANSGAR NÜNNING (University of Giessen) titled "Genre and Genre Theory Matter: Criteria for Defining and Classifying Genres and a Typology of Historical Novels and other Narrative Genres". Ansgar Nünning proposed in this lecture a systematisation for the criteria of genres using the examples of the historical novel and contemporary fiction. Criticising dichotomous

models as well as ad hoc coinages, he suggested differentiating sub-genres according to a paradigmatic axis of selection, a syntagmatic axis of combination and a discursive axis of communication. Alongside these axes, Ansgar Nünning proposed a classification of the genre of the historical novel on a grading scale between the two poles of heteroreferentiality and

autoreferentiality. He stressed that his gradation chart was not meant to be a systematic grid but rather a heuristic tool for the reading of novels, in general, and postmodern literature, in particular, with its many hybrid texts. Ansgar Nünning then gave an overview of further fields of relevance to genre research to end a lecture that, overall, provided a systematic and theory-rich start for the conference by introducing major topics in the context of genre and interpretation.

In the second keynote lecture, provocatively titled "Science Fiction, or, the Most Typical Genre in World Literature", BRIAN MCHALE (Ohio State University) defined science fiction as a late, marginal and transmedial genre with an unstable canon. In analysing Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (US title, 1956; UK title: *Tiger! Tiger!*) for its transmedial potential, he identified three main plot strands within the book and pointed out that the plot itself reflects the situation of the Cold War-era in the 1950s by estranging the contemporary world.



McHale therefore assumed that science fiction novels use prefabricated motifs that are connected to the principle of newness as they are situated in fictitious time. Subsequently, McHale stressed the concept of "the kernel of novum" in the novel and in the science fiction genre in general. When applied to *The Stars My Destination*, the novel can be read as a counter-model for Cold War reality in the mid 1950s that foreshadows globalisation. The genre achieves not only a modelling of but also a modelling for reality, based on the processes of recycling and reconfiguration. In that point, McHale referred to the previous lecture by comparing historical novels and science fiction: both endeavour to create a reality through another time, either through the past or through the future. Finally, McHale commented on the experiment of reading classics "through the glasses" of the science fiction genre to gain new insights. McHale ultimately came to his provocative final assumption that science fiction is the most typical genre of world literature, since the experimental value of science fiction is greater than of any realist fiction. McHale's lecture itself thus achieved a meta-level with the thought experiment of the 'novum' of science fiction being a key genre.

The first workshop, "Reconsidering Genre Theory and Bakhtin", gave a theoretical background to genre by focussing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts, which have greatly influenced genre theory. The researchers in that workshop applied the Bakhtinian theory to a wide range of contexts. LAKSHMI BANDLAMUDI (City University of New York), for instance, tested in her talk "Timeless Philosophies and (Un)timely Interpretations: Bakhtin and Bhartrhari in the Internet Age" the capaciousness of the theories of Bakhtin and Sanskrit philosopher Bhartrhari within the context of the modern-day technological era. LEEORE SCHNAIRSOHN (Princeton University) analysed in his paper "The Poetic Address and the Loophole Addressee" poetry as dialogic discourse by focussing on Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and loophole which he associated with Ossip Mandelstam's concept of the ideal reader and Paul Celan's idea of the

poetic shape. In her paper "Bakhtin's Concept of Subjectivity in his Theory of the Novel and Its Roots in the German Aesthetics and Theory of the Novel" LIISA STEINBY (University of Turku) traced similarities between Bakhtinian subjectivity and Hegel's and Lukács's theories of the novel. Finding application in topics as diverse as German aesthetics and the contemporary internet age, this workshop successfully demonstrated the universal character of Bakhtin's theory and its potential for connections with other approaches. At the same time, further workshops took place which discussed topics such as science fiction and its sub-genres, the medieval Japanese Zuihitsu genre and – in Finnish language – the relationship of literary genres to reading.



The workshop "The Novel in Generic Analysis" brought together theoretical and practical aspects of genres. In the first talk, "Defining the Novel Genre: Currie, Bakhtin, Lukács and the Temporality of the Novel", AINO MÄKIKALLI (University of Turku) focussed on the problem of time in relation to genre. She referred specifically to Lukács and Bakhtin, who both used the aspect of time when trying to differentiate between the epic and the novel. SAIJA ISOMAA (University of Helsinki) outlined in "Fowler's

Theory of Genres and Its Application in the Analysis of Finnish 19th Century Realistic Novels" the basic tenets of Alastair Fowler's genre theory *Kind of Literature* (1982) and demonstrated the theory's transferability to the context of Finnish realistic novels. In her talk "Gospel or Elegy? Narrative Selves and Others in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*" HANNA MÄKELÄ (University of Helsinki) raised the question of whether the relationship of two characters within a novel can provide information about its generic property. ROBERT VOGT (University of Giessen) finally introduced the concept of garden-path narratives with a paper titled "Down the Garden Path. Misinterpretations as a Textual Strategy". He therein determined the current concept to be ill-defined and specified central features of garden-path narratives, as distinguished from unreliable narration. A recurring motif in the discussions of this workshop was linked to the general problem of defining genres and distinguishing between genres and modes, thus showing the ambiguous use of the term 'genre'.

At the same time, the relation between genre and narrative identities was discussed in the workshop "Interpreting Life-Stories – Narrative Identities Across Genres". NETTA NAKARI (University of Tampere) investigated the "Transformation of Passion: When Private Becomes Public in Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple*". She concentrated in her paper on Ernaux's autobiographical novel as an example of the relation of reality and fiction and its consequences for the blurring of the boundary between private and public text forms. Accordingly, Nakari illustrated that autobiographies can be considered a genre at the

intersection of fact and fiction. TEEMU MANNINEN (University of Tampere) focussed on the genre of autobiography, as well, in a paper titled "Editing Genre. Interpretation and the Problem of Autobiography in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*". A concurrent workshop shed light on "Satire, Manipulative Satire and Polemics". The last day of the conference started with the third keynote lecture by VERA NÜNNING (University of Heidelberg) on "The Relevance of Generic Frames for the Interpretation of Novels", wherein she reflected on the importance of generic expectations for reading and interpreting novels. She stressed the significance of generic frames which consist generally of



three aspects: the cultural context, textual properties and historical changes. Using Oliver Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), she illustrated how the reception of novels can change according to their cultural and historical context. However, once genre conventions are undercut in experimental works, the reader is obliged to completely reevaluate the novel's story, thereby altering interpretation and reception significantly. In concluding, Vera Nünning defined genres as sets of expectations shaped by the knowledge of other works, which are, moreover, influenced by cultural ways of thinking. She stressed that generic frames are relevant in order to establish bodies of text and to identify modification relations between texts. These frames help, furthermore, prevent anachronistic misinterpretations. Vera Nünning demonstrated the strong interrelation between genre and interpretation by showing the relevance of generic frames and their utility in the creation of adequate interpretations.

The workshop on travel writing was concerned with interpretative strategies specific to travel writing as well as with the defining expectations that are most typical for its distinct sub-genres. TINNTI KLAPURI (University of Turku) presented a paper on "Time and Genre in Anton Chekhov's Documentary Travelogue *Sakhalin Island*" that illustrated the special generic form of Chekhov's novel which blends scientific and literary discourses. She referred furthermore to the temporal arrangement of the novel and the crucial divide between the narrator's and the exiles' experience of time and place – an arguably central feature of exile literature. In a presentation on "Cold Journeys. Generic Features and Interpretive Analysis of the Arctic Travel Report Around 1900" KAI MARCEL SICKS (University of Giessen) examined Arctic travel reports and their generic rules. One of the main features he pointed to was the double contextualisation of these novels, which can, on the one hand, be considered within the context of other contemporaneous travel reports but, on the other hand, lend themselves to comparisons based on narrative similarities, e.g. novels of World War I. He concluded with the thesis that the strategy of double contextualisation could be a general means of travel writing interpretation. ELISA ANTZ (University of Giessen) analysed "Road Stories" as a typically American and transmedial genre. Defining the American highway as a chronotope in the



Bakhtinian sense, she concluded that the generic aspect of chronotopes in Road Stories is closely connected to the structure of the romantic quest. In a talk titled "Travel Writing as Referential Discourse" KAI MIKKONEN (University of Helsinki) discussed the exchanges between and mutual influence of fiction and referential discourse which are relevant for the analysis of travel literature, stating that these exchanges destabilise the plausibility which accounts for the genre of travel writing. The workshop focussed on one main genre in particular and showed its various facets while at the same time keeping track of its common generic rules. Workshops running parallel to this focussed on "Layered Realism" and again on the novel in generic analysis and narrative identities across genres.

The conference was concluded by a keynote lecture by BO PETTERSSON (University of Helsinki). He discussed the relationship between genre and mimesis by referring to crucial issues that had been repeatedly touched upon over the course of the conference. Emphasising that genre and mimesis are rarely considered in conjunction, Pettersson simultaneously pointed out that literary work is partly defined by the way in which it makes use of mimesis. Pettersson furthermore stressed the ubiquity of mimesis throughout genres, stating that literature had always been anthropomorphising, which means that all fictional action presented or experienced is somehow related to human life. Referring to Brian McHale's lecture, Pettersson explained that science fiction could be regarded as both realist and mimetic. To make fiction believable, it has to be described in imaginative terms. According to Pettersson, realism can only become alive if it is depicted in an imaginative way. He concluded that the manifold relations between genre and mimesis must be studied in their respective contexts and illustrated how genres are based on multiple features, including the central touchstone of mimesis. By referring to several key topics discussed in the previous lectures and workshops, Pettersson provided an elegant conclusion to the entire conference.



Altogether, the conference proved that genre and genre theory are essential when it comes to the interpretation of literary texts. The various central topics discussed at the conference (time, mimesis, realism, science fiction, travel writing, etc.) demonstrate the wide-ranging influence and applicability of the genre phenomenon in general. One particular aspect, the research potential of reading different texts "through genre glasses", was repeatedly taken up. The

conference proved, in sum, that especially in the context of postmodernist literature with its hybrid texts, genre conventions and generic frames help to shape an adequate interpretation. Thus, genre remains a highly relevant topic that offers considerable potential for innovation and scholarly assessment.